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Knauff, Theodore

Christian

Buttons as currency

[Philadelphia?]

[1893?]

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## Buttons as Currency.\*

TEXT:—"Our assortment of buttons is large, and varied enough to suit all tastes; and the prices bring them within the reach of all."—*Advertisement in Daily Newspaper.*

In the small college town where I was educated the students were required to attend service on Sundays in the village church, and to sit in the gallery. No one but students occupied that lofty eyrie, consequently the students did pretty much as they pleased. In those days students, as other people now, had very little money. They were obliged to resort to all kind of expedients to make both ends meet, and allow a margin for the common necessities of life, such as taking the girls out driving, home-made mead at the village store, cigars, etc.

It was the custom to take up a collection in that little gallery every service, which, under the circumstances, was a bore to say the least. By common consent a plan was adopted to relieve the strain. It originated, it was believed, among the theological students. It was in substance a determination to deposit buttons in place of coin in the collection basket. By making the practice general we hoped that the authorities could be made to see

\* By Preacher Burnem (Theo. C. Knauff). First printed September 10, 1893.

the folly of attempting to collect money from students and desist. Whenever a button came loose from our clothing, we made a pin or a tooth-pick do duty instead, and hoarded the button for Sunday. For one whole college year nothing but buttons was deposited in the gallery basket, but still the collections went on.

We tried repeatedly to ascertain how the authorities took to the idea. We found that the contents of the button basket were emptied after service into a heap on the vestry-room table, which heap was composed of the contents of all the baskets. The warden then soberly proceeded to sort the buttons into a pile by themselves, as he likewise sorted the pennies,\* the three-cent pieces, the half dimes and the dimes. Further than that he never had occasion to go. The pennies and buttons were always about equal and were the largest piles. This much ascertained, the question was, what became of the buttons? Each denomination of coin and the buttons were wrapped in paper and all were deposited in the warden's coat pocket. The pennies, we found, he paid for personal bills. As they would not go in bank, he probably gave credit to the church on his bank account before using. There was never a breath of suspicion against the warden's character. The warden's baker always received rolls of pennies (big coppers they were then), likewise the butcher and grocer, for all three were one. The stage fare to and from the nearest railway station was always paid in pennies. A beggar

\*The use of the word "penny" is incorrect, but that is what we called them.

never asked for a penny in vain, for it was too good a chance to get rid of one—penny or beggar. The man became known by his pennies.

Beside his church duties, the warden was likewise one of our college professors. One day all the members of a class, to emphasize his reputation as a penny encyclopedia, deposited each a penny on his desk as they passed to their seats on entering his room. His desk was covered with the large copper pennies spread out loosely, and the class looked for punishment as the penalty of their fun. The professor said nothing. The class felt badly when they saw the pennies lie there unnoticed during the hour, and were obliged to leave them there afterwards for him to gather up at his leisure. He was "in" about twenty-five cents by the operation.

But the buttons. Though he took them home with him, we never could tell what became of them. We estimated that as there were about one hundred students and two collections a Sunday, and that as we often put in two or three buttons each at a time, including shoe and shirt buttons, there must be a collection somewhere of about ten thousand buttons gathered during the college year, but we never could get a trace of them.

Of late years we find there is a man, a gate-keeper in a city cemetery, priding himself on the possession of a collection of buttons, no two alike, which he proposes to exhibit. The collection includes some 20,000 specimens and is valued at \$8,000. Though the man appears to have been no relation or acquaintance of the professor, and even

lived in another State, we are convinced that there was some connection. At the fortieth annual reunion of our class a committee was appointed to investigate, and we are sure it will find our surmises correct.

We left college after that year (we were seniors then) and we do not know how the scheme ended. But it answered our purpose well while it lasted. We were relieved of a financial drain, and the payee took our money at its par value. What more could we want?

Lately this occurrence has suggested to several of us a remedy for existing troubles with the currency. Why not monetize buttons? Silver or gold have but a limited intrinsic value for use in the arts. Silver is probably the most useful. But outside of silver plate or jewelry, a little use for ornamentation as leaf or plating, for which gold is also used, and the manufacture of nitrate of silver for photographers, of what value is it? But a button is different. It has a fixed intrinsic value. I have seen the time when the last supporting trousers fastening has given out in public, when I would have given worlds for a button.

The practical use of buttons, which gives them their value, is universal. There is not a man, woman or child, baby or superannuated old person, who does not or could not use buttons. A baby especially will always prefer a button to a pin in its clothing. Bone buttons have a particular value. They can be ground up for a fertilizer. As our professor did some farming and bone was then our principal church circulating medium, perhaps

that is how he used ours. Buttons can also be used as poker chips and for children's playthings. These uses give a permanent value to buttons which would be independent of their value as money.

There is also a permanent demand for them. Efforts have been made at different times to put buttons out of fashion, substituting strings, hooks and eyes, pins, permanent sewing, elastic goods that need no buttons, and even glue, but they have never been successful. There are always some who remain true to buttons, and the buttons have always come back into general use.

The money use of buttons would do away with all question of a bimetallic standard. Instead of having a standard of but one metal or two, we would have a universal standard, including not only all metals but other substances as well. Buttons are or can be made out of any metal—iron, brass (the original and ancient coinage of China and other nations), lead, tin, nickel, aluminum, silver, gold (as collar buttons)—also out of wood, bone, rubber, cloth, muslin, pearl and porcelain. If two metals would make a more stable standard than one metal, a standard of more substances would be still more stable, just as surely as two pigs under a gate will make more noise than one pig in similar circumstances. There need never be a scarcity of material to make values fluctuate. It need not be objected that for that reason the value would fall in case too many were made, for, as already stated, the practical value is too great. If at first the value were put fictitiously high, and held up by artificial

means, as by corners, deals or enforced purchases, there might be that danger. There are buttons that are held at fancy prices. Some large buttons for ladies' cloaks and dresses have been known to sell at from \$6.00 to \$12.00 a dozen, but that is not their intrinsic value. That value falls as soon as they go out of fashion. But such a standard need not be adopted. Fix the value in the first place at the normal, say 100 to 1.

Besides, if there should be an increased supply, an increased demand could easily be made. If buttons were monetized, it would become the fashion to wear more of them. Our coats would all be modeled after those of bell boys or "buttons," with long double rows for ornament. "Man-with-many-buttons" would be synonymous with Rich man. On change "Man-afraid-of-his-buttons" would be a conservative operator. A "Button-buster" would be a headlong plunger, etc.

The ornamental use of buttons could be made a great safety-valve to prevent overproduction. Many millions of them could thus be used. As it is, even now, half the buttons are for show only. Men's coat cuff buttons have usually no practical value, while those on our coat tails are only a survival of the days when we fastened back the lower front corners of our coats to make an impromptu swallow-tail, or to keep them out of the way when we meant business, as the Continental soldiers did.

The advantages of such an interchangeable currency, so to speak, would be obvious. There was once a city street car company which introduced the sale of round, perforated, rubber tickets, the

size of coin, for passage, as more cleanly, handy, durable and convenient than paper. The employees sold them from a string like Indian wampum or Chinese money. These tickets got to be known as "buttons." At that time a negro minstrel troupe burlesqued the system in a street car in which colored folks without the requisite means could ride by cutting off a breeches button where it would show least, doing without temporarily. Though that was a burlesque, to come down to solid fact, why should we not do so?

One great advantage of the button system would be that it would give permanent employment to a deserving class, the button makers. They turn out a useful product which we could not conveniently do without and they are entitled to protection.

And the whole scheme is so easy of execution. All that is needed to make a piece of dirty paper valuable is for a strong government to say that it is so. In this case government aid is unnecessary. All that is necessary is for all to agree to take buttons at their par value, which we can readily do, because the value is there. When our Civil War began and currency became scarce, we adopted circulating mediums of our own. For instance, small notes of stage companies went into general circulation because they were good for a stage ride at any time. In the same way we used postage stamps, because, if the worst came, they would at least carry a letter. The Government stopped such practices, because of the danger of counterfeiting, and on account of the unlimited supply possible. The stage company might issue more

promises for rides than they could possibly fill, with all the stages in creation and eternity to do it in, to say nothing of the fact that so many people, even if they all wanted to ride, did not exist.

With a practical thing like buttons, as shown, an oversupply would be well nigh impossible, supposing that the value was kept down to rock bottom to start with; and as for counterfeiting, why any child could tell whether the piece offered was a genuine button—could be made to do duty as a button—if one had to put it to its primary use, instead of passing it; except, perhaps, it might be one of the patent styles of button, and they ought to be legislated out of existence anyhow. They are very trying to the temper and very uncertain. Their moral effect is bad, for they cause profanity, and so help to risk the life of the State. An immoral nation cannot be long-lived, as history has repeatedly shown.

**END OF  
TITLE**